

Farming Update for Devon Churches Rural Forum Meeting 1st February 2022

The headlines from John Wibberley - Chairman & Chaplain of FCN Devon and Professor of Agriculture

- Common for delayed dispatch of livestock to abattoirs owing to covid-affected staff
- Relatively mild winter and winter-sown crops looking quite well generally
- Farmers still waiting for *ELMS* (Environmental Land Management Scheme) opportunities to emerge; too few taking initiatives yet
- Many organisations 'onto' mental health although there are many needy cases...
- Vulnerability of JIT delivery and dispatch – including with intensive pigs

From Danny Semorad

I always think that mid-January is about halfway through the winter and with the bright sunshine today it was still light after 5pm. That's good for me, as I'm a sunlight person! Let's start with the weather. Although there have been some wet periods, there has been dry as well. In fact it was one of the driest Novembers on record. This means the winter cereal crops are all looking good and grass has been growing well since last May. We always say that grass needs a rest at some point, so perhaps we have a cold Spring or dry Summer to come.

Although prices have held up well, they have been overtaken by input prices. Farming inputs have increased by 22% in 2021 - the most obvious being fertiliser which has trebled in price. This is a very worrying situation.

Also the change from BPS to environmental payment is causing great concern. The government seems determined to carry on with the existing timescale although Defra are miles behind with the implementation of ELMS, SFI or whatever the latest acronym is. If farmers were given more detail they could start planning for the new future. At the moment the government seem determined to import more and produce less at home. Not good for the environment.

I think we are heading for a turbulent year and I am trying not to be pessimistic.

From David Moore – Beef and Sheep farmer North Devon

Looking through your recent email, certainly makes my bones shiver for I can only think of the younger generation which now face a turbulent time.

Yes the weather has been exceptionally kind to us farmers over the last year, and probably one of the best haymaking time that I can remember in my 50years of Farming.

The politics of agriculture is something else at the moment. I am told by members of the public, that farmers are no longer needed to produce food. The thoughts are that we all have to think about producing energy. Well may be they are correct when we have seen energy prices in some cases double over the last year.

I notice that more young dairy farmers are turning to the New Zealand method of producing milk, in order to avoid some of the high cost of producing milk from UK conventional methods.

Farming families are being torn apart because of little confidence of the future.

Leaving Europe is now taking its toll on so many businesses. My grandson finished Harper Adams 3 years ago, and has been working in the Transport Business driving large lorries for 2 years, and more recently has gone into H.G.V management.

From Andy Jerrard – Methodist Church Rural Support Worker and Market Chaplaincy Co-ordinator

It is not often I am accused of being an optimist but for a few sentences optimism is what you will get. However, then normal service will resume as realism takes hold.

The optimistic view (not shared by many I hasten to add!), is that under the new regime for 'agricultural support?!' all the big landowners will take their best land out of food production to use for other (financially well rewarded) purposes (this is already happening), good land will continue to disappear under houses, HS2 will take even more land than anticipated, we have a bad potato blight year and a severe outbreak of yellow rust across Europe (having removed the best plant protection products - already happening) and food prices as a consequence will likely double. This would not be good for some people (most of the general public) but would be good for farmers as, (a) it would produce a decent income, (b) they would definitely be key workers for more than five minutes, and (c) Government might realise that the ultimate public good from land is producing food (there is a good chance that these notes may have included that phrase before!).

Realism unfortunately says something different (at least in the short to medium term - the scenario described above may yet happen). Realism is that inflation is rocketing – and not just in general terms but specifically in agriculture and at a rate considerably above that for the general public conservative estimates (with a small c) are looking at upwards of 12 % and much greater in some sectors.

If you were to be a pig producer currently you would most definitely wish you weren't. Even by the standards of a very cyclical industry the last few months have been dire. When you sell cull sows and boars at £10-15 (probably animals weighing 150-200 kgs), weaned pigs at £2-3 per head and other categories at similarly give-away prices the last thing you need is price increases in the feed of £40-50/tonne. It is psychologically puzzling for a farmer to have market ready pigs culled because they can't be processed, whilst parts of the world have starving children.

The same puzzle for a normal mind-set applies with the changes from Basic Payment Scheme to Environmental Land Management Scheme (ELMS). Probably the most common comment of late on that is 'we can't eat trees'- a reference to one of the likely income streams in the new way of things. There is a genuine perplexedness at the thrust of ELMS - even allowing for the still very limited information as to how it will work. At a wider level it is strange (at best) that the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs seems not to have a likely figure for

the reduction in the number of farmers as a result of these policies . Exeter University estimates a reduction of 25-30%, DEFRA appear not to even have a guesstimate.

Similarly there seems to be no thought as to the impact on the rural economy. If there are far fewer livestock, there will be even less famers and farm workers, less agricultural suppliers and therefore fewer shops, garages and similar. To quote an oft overused phrase 'the thinking seems to be lacking in joined-upnesss.'

It is to be hoped that by the end of the summer at least some of the fog will have cleared and there may be some sense of where, (however rocky) the road is going to lead.